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Where Do We Stand:

AN ADDRESS

BEFORE THE

New York State Teachers' Association,

AT

UTICA, THURSDAY, AUGUST 2, 1855,

BY DAVID B. SCOTT, A. M.

ALBANY:
PUBLISHED BY ORDER OF THE ASSOCIATION.
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Peabody Institute
Baltimore
AUG 2 . 1928

ADDRESS.

He that for the occasion is elevated above his peers, to instruct or inspirit, assumes a responsibility of the very gravest character. For this reason, it appears to me no light or easy business to satisfy the requirements of an occasion like the present. For the subject of teaching and teachers has been handled before your body by so many masters; the poor pedagogue has been looked at from so many various stand points, now perhaps as an artist, and again as a worker: he has been praised and patted; he has been elevated, and elevated and elevated, and it has become so great a hobby of the best of men with the very best intentions, to shout pæans to the common school system, that I had almost despaired before I had well accepted of the invitation to address you. And yet, I took courage and comfort from the fact, that the very best offering I could bring would be the fruits of earnestness. Fresh from the very buzz and dust of the school room, surely, there must be some things to be said by one of yourselves, that must spring from the life, and have a certain energy because they are living experiences. I address myself therefore to the young men and women of our profession; to those who have begun with hope and energy; many of whom are before me—and it is their attention that I especially request to the few thoughts that are to follow.

My theme is "Where do we stand," in the social scale as common school teachers, and in addition I shall take the liberty to suggest some remedies by way of improvement.

We endeavor to believe that community is honest when it tells us that our calling is one of the very noblest in which men can be engaged. At least we have been told it so often, that there seems no danger of our forgetting it. Community has not quite told us that we are therefore the noblest men. But we accept the recognition of the nobleness of our calling as something that community means to stand by. It is something for public opinion to have made this progress. Something, for it to feel that the instruction of its children is nobler than the care of its live stock, and something more for it to have expressed this frequently and apparently with sympathy. Justice, saith the proverb, hath a leaden foot, but an iron hand. So is it with enlightened public opinion, under a free constitution, it swings often slowly round, but it does swing at last to its place. It has made with us a part of its curve of oscillation.

Were our only controversy now with community, the belly to be fed and the back to be clothed, a simple war cry could easily be

raised—"More money! more money!" That might perhaps, prove successful enough. But a man must be respected in his labor, must have regards promptly and cheerfully paid him, must have depth and geniality of soil about him, to let him expand as far as the limits of his internal growth. Without this, life has neither individuality, nor happiness. We may have family, wife, children, perhaps a limited circle of friends, but the vigorous flush of life is not there.

What to me are a great man's opinions of the nobleness of my calling, even if it give me a fair living, if he knows me only in my school room, and ignores me when I meet him with his great friend, the next day, on the public walk? A great discrepancy like this stuns me like a blow, it makes everything for the time a muddle; on some natures, it hangs like a millstone, in others, it provokes the intensest bitterness. Either the great man was profuse of his patronage, facile in his expressions, or simply played the hypocrite for a purpose. Perhaps he had achieved that most difficult and casuistical of mental operations. "Honoring the chair, and despising him who filled it." Such treatment must, on every youth, prove nothing but disastrous. The mind does not readily reach a point of rest after such a vibration.

That great, genial and loving soul, Sir Walter Scott, has himself reported by Lockhart as saying, that he never knew a school master that wasn't an idiot; that is, I suppose he had never found one whose pedantry did not make him an ungenial companion. But Scott was a slave to aristocratic forms, with all his kindliness of heart. The position of the teacher was an anomalous one in Sir Walter's eyes, not assured, but pendulous, like another Mahomet's coffin, between the professions above and the artizans below. Puzzled to class him, Waverly put him among the idiots. Of a piece with this, old Boswell of Auchincleck could express no more bitter contempt for the sinking character of his son, than that "Bozzy had gone off with a man that kept a schule, and ca'd it an academy." The school master was no less a character than the illustrious Samuel Johnson.

Here in America, we think we have outgrown all this. Society with us, we say, does not rest on imposing props or shams, but on the worth of men. Each stratum does not lie heavy and unmoved on its lower neighbor, crowded in its turn by its neighbor above. But faults, breaks and upheavals throughout the entire line, attest great forces from beneath constantly working upwards to the surface. This we reckon well to be the glory of our society.

By what has it come about, then, that the teacher—I mean always the common school teacher—has neither status nor influence corresponding to the nobility of his calling; that for the most part, he is reckoned simply a school keeper, and nothing else; that the lowest seats at feast and synagogue are left for him, if he be left any; that he must sit so often wisely dumb, and prove a willing listener to others' wisdom; that church and state must be pillared and governed but not by him; that, in short, he must be committed to the eternal silences, to comfort himself as he may.

The finest school houses rise on all hands, better than many of the ancient temples to the gods. They are so numerous, too, that in act they make a style of architecture, distinct and readily understood.

Even the very furniture has become a separate branch of manufacture, lucrative and extensive. A stranger is shown with pride, amid the notable things, the school houses. How often is he shown the school master or the school mistress? One would like to see amid a fair garden the gardener himself. The roses are sweet, the exotics are rare, the grounds are in excellent taste, but where is the mind that arranged them thus, is there no honor due him; some visible token of respect; shall we go cap in hand to the garden or the gardener?

Or, is it in an assembly of that best society, where wit, good breeding and culture reign, you will find the teacher of the village or the city common school. Ask yourselves this question and answer it too. When Dr. Hamel comes on a scientific tour from St. Petersburgh, I should much like to see him in private, to hear him, to learn of him, mayhap, if he were willing to communicate; or sit with Emerson, when he is genial beside his friend's chimney corner; or mingle with wisdom, wit or genius, as it curves and sways in social life. But how many of such opportunities do the most favored of us get; and when some of us do get them, so seldom have they come, that we are often too awkward, or oppressed or uneasy to profit by them. In social life a man or woman must be easy, to prove a cheerful absorbent.

As to public life, I only make a passing allusion, for I find but few of my mates that have risen to any celebrity therein. One or two, I know, have fledged at once into aldermen; but an alderman in my own city, is rather an ascent downwards. Another—a man of spirit and genius, by the way—had the terrible audacity to placard the fences in his recent canvass for register, with great letters, "Vote for John Roe the school master;" thus throwing his calling in the very teeth of the public, and in spite of this, as I verily believe, was successful. There are no doubt a few other instances, but these partial exceptions only prove a strong rule the other way.

Thus it has come about that in this year of our Lord, 1855, we have reached a point in our common school system, where the public praise much, where the orators have many ready rounded periods, and where are vastly better school houses than formerly, but where I do not find the social position of the teacher correspondingly improved.

It is easy to find fault with this state of things and so organize a great army of grumblers; to supply officers and orators for such an army enough; to growl out in the plainest English, "Less talk—less talk, and better treatment." But will this remedy the matter thoroughly?

By way of a remedy many words have been spent on the recognition of teaching as a profession. As though there had been some defrauding of us by the public out of the worth of a name, or a calling us out of our true name. According to this, it would appear that the true social remedy, is to get this name of a profession, because we see that professional men have a certain status, which we have not, and which we very much long to get. It is the Tyrian purple, the robe of ermine, the fasces, the very thunderbolts of Jove, the encompassing around of a great robe of influence, this name of a profession. Thus honestly say some, and no doubt believe what they say.

A good name is a good thing; a noble name is also a good thing; but what makes the name noble or good? The worth or worthiness

of the wearer. If my license to be a teacher shall introduce me to a circle of noble men or women, as a cross of the legion of honor at once inducts the wearer into the order of all brave spirits, then it is something to have the license of a teacher. But does any profession really do this? Does the ministry which fences itself round with the highest barriers, which guards itself by a jealous, and exclusive watchfulness? Any such arrangement, though it may guard against looseness of doctrine or irregularity of life does not of itself give professional status.

> "The rank is but the guinea's stamp:
> A man's a man for a' that."

A man must show himself a man in this, as elsewhere. The day of drones is passing away in this as everywhere. Do you doubt it? Look round on the ministry, and count those who have character and influence, who have not in some way or other deserved it. Justice is not blind, although the old mythology wrapped a bandage about her eyes. This is to be reckoned one of our American blessings: by no means the smallest. For, why should my brethren of the law, or divinity or medicine, be professional and respected, because it is law, or divinity or medicine they profess? And, it will be found, I fancy, if we examine deeper, that it is not law and divinity as things that do ennoble the men in them. But it is the noble living of those who have been in them, that has come down on the present, and each generation enters, in a measure, into the reputation of the past. There are others who contend that as the teacher has been paid shamefully low, and yet is so paid in many places; that the value of a man's services is not to be underrated without lowering the man, and that salary is often the foundation of social consideration. With them the true way to give social position, is to pay the teachers better. Perhaps this might in some cases have the desired effect, but there is a very simple way to dispose of this position, and that is by the question, "Why are better salaries paid than formerly?" Simply, because the services of teachers are worth more because they are better. If this be likely to improve our social grade, the matter would seem to lie greatly within our own reach.

At this point, bear with me when I say that perhaps in this matter society is not wholly to blame, and that we are ourselves to blame not a little. And this brings me to speak of the remedies within our power.

Highest, I place a consciousness of the worth of our calling; no human being ever yet worked well in what he felt to be a worthless work. It makes little difference what others may think of its value, what the Honorable Governor This, or the Reverend Doctor That, may say. Your own thought influences you, because your own thought stays by you: their sayings are to you at second hand. If nothing but the face of drudgery, sad, weary drudgery, looks up at you, out of your calling, rid yourself by looking at it earnestly, and settle it decidedly, whether this face can not be turned into the noble face of most pleasant duty. If there be any love in the business, a good heart and hope, teaching will stand such an examination. If we will look with a right spirit how much shall we see! These are noble lines in that fine old poet, Herbert:

"A man that looks on glass
On it may stay his eye,
Or, if it pleaseth, through it pass,
And then the heaven espy.

All may of thee partake,
Nothing can be so mean,
Which, with this tincture, for thy sake,
Will not grow bright and clean.

A servant, with this clause,
Makes drudgery divine:
Who sweeps a room, as by thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine.

This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold
And that which God doth touch and own
Can not for less be told."

And so, I think, all work becomes ennobled by the spirit of the worker. The spirit can indeed turn everything to gold. Think from this, if we would have others respect us socially, how necessary it is that we be self-respectful. And how can we respect ourselves if we respect not our work?

Again, our work may be degraded in our eyes by the mechanical way in which we proceed. I use mechanical in the blind, thoughtless machine sense. There are mechanics at teaching, just as there are mechanics at law, at divinity and at medicine. Let us master the principles. Principles lift a man out of the machine life and give him power, momentum, originality and variety. Principles enable us to combine, to test the old, to try all the spirits, and keep us from being mere imitators to the fiftieth generation. For what ought it to be to you how Julius teaches at a given time, and under certain circumstances, for you shall not hear a rich minded, many sided teacher, teach in the same way, the very next time you hear him. Neither be overshadowed by any great name, or smothered by any cloak of influence, no matter who may be the wearer. However rude your plans, let them be founded on the principles of your craft, let them grow out of the occasion, the character of your pupils, your own thoughts. Seek variety as opposed to monotony. This latter is the great slug-worm of our profession. How long the hours! how wearisome the days! if we must plod on in the same beaten paths. Seek variety in method. Take suggestions from every quarter, but think out your own plans. The dullness is not always in the scholar. Teach under the pressure of a heavy affliction, under fatigue, under bodily derangement, and see how great an effort is necessary by change to keep up the life of the school room. Even the black heavens, and the leaden sky are often our enemies, which may indeed be overcome by throwing variety and new life into our exercises.

I reach now another point of the greatest importance to our self-respect; the necessity of Truth in our work. There is a dishonest way of working in teaching as in everything else. What, for the most part, are those public examinations, where things seem to glide along so smoothly before flattering mothers, and approving friends. Try these Dead Sea apples, and taste the ashes. What is that waste of time on special training before, the neglect of the rest, the unhealthy

excitement, the bad stimulus of unearned praise, the lassitude that follows. I do not now allude to the influence on the pupils, the fearful lessons, they then learn and never forget. There is no blindness so great on our part, as that which makes us confound the applause we work for in this way, as a success. Is a hot house growth a healthy or a natural growth? Into what untold difficulties should we come, if our markets depended on such a supply. The course of nature takes its steady course, and may be forced only to the injury of the plant. The whole brood of public examinations are to be dreaded as the greatest temptation to falsehood and chicanery. For who are the most skillful in these displays, and by what means do they reach the summit. Are they the patient, the strictly honest, the hard working among us? My observation does not bear me out affirmatively. If we are compelled to present a class which in twenty minutes shall show an entire familiarity with geography or astronomy or history or arithmetic or algebra, as shall determine our character as teachers, and the reputation of the school for a whole year following, then, it requires an amount of self-denial, to which many of us are strangers, to prevent our placing the picked ones of the class before the public. And practically what is the case? The best pupils are selected, drilled, tasked, forced and crammed, and the examination is achieved to the great wonder of the uninitiated. There is no sadder mistake, I am well convinced, than to suppose that those whose opinion is worth having care for such displays, or are in any favorable way affected by them. I mean the enlightened portion of the community. It is a mistake quite as grievous, to suppose that any applause elevates us or our profession, which, tried by the severe yet eternal principles of truth, lower us in our own estimation. These are noble words of John Ruskin, "There are some words slight in the sight of self-love, some errors slight in the estimate of wisdom, but truth forgives no insult and endures no stain." Granted you are or might be an adept at such displays, would you be the Barnum or the Page of your profession? I assert, then, without hesitation, that to be true men and women in this our business, we must decide to settle the question of our public examinations, by the great principles of truth. That is dearer than the popular and momentary applause.

One of the shoals against which we strike, and to the consideration of which we are naturally led by what has just been said, lies in our ambition to be hastily great. In the cities, the waves of excitement are the strongest; even in the country you feel their strength. The press of battle and of knights is all about us, each seeking in that intense development of the individual to have the foremost place. Partaking of the pensive nature of the student the teacher sees the brilliant prizes lie out of his path, and occasionally when he has caught the fever about him, he joins in the melee. I think I can perceive, in this restlessness, in these thorns of rivalry, in the comparison of worldly progress, we are so constantly making, the cause of much dissatisfaction with our business. And yet, every one of us ought to be great in whatever he is called to do. "Greatness is not entailed in some places or duties, or in certain offices or occasions. If the labor even be trivial, let us by our thinking and character make it liberal. There seems nothing peculiarly great in the business of

fiddling. A fiddler is rather a common product, and yet Paganini had both character and fortune from a string of catgut." My own measure of the ability of any man or woman, is very simple, it is the ease with which he fills every requirement of any position into which he may be called. Thus, his work of to-day is well done, completely done. If circumstances call him higher, he will as readily, as easily fill that sphere to-morrow. In this sense, every man shows his true greatness as he progresses. The pressure of the times, the love of notoriety, drives us into many fooleries, neither to be countenanced nor defended. So that, at length, a notice in the papers, an elaborate puff, become as sweet to us as in the old heroic times were the nectar and ambrosia of the gods.

It is to be borne in mind, however, that, the very nature of our work seems often to drive us in this direction. For we can never see its complete effects. The painter on his canvas, the sculptor on his marble, the architect on his materials, if they live long enough, may see their works completed, and the beauty they have created becomes "a thing of joy forever." On the teacher's work here the dome never rises to completeness. It is yonder, in the heavens. The great eternal future covers it, and the only collyrium that can clear the eye for such a vision, is honest work and a noble faith. How petty in comparison seem all other rewards! When we consider on how slight a foundation the thing we call popular applause rests; how often it is the result of mere caprice, of ill nature, of class or caste or habit or disease or misfortune; how variable in its moods; how unjust, often, in the fame it gives; it requires little to bring us to allow that nobler incentives lie in our work and in ourselves. I have touched thus on what might be called the ethics of our profession, and their absolute necessity to self respect in our work. I proceed to the necessity of a proper preparation, to the necessity of culture. It seems almost unnecessary to make a plea for a thorough acquaintance with the branches usually taught in our common schools. I have known some to make a boast that in their younger days, when they began to teach, they had studied day by day in advance of their pupils in the common schools, and so, had managed to keep up a respectable appearance of knowledge. Perhaps this may do as an exception, but is little to be followed as a rule. It especially appears to be a thing not to be published, but rather, in a modest man, to be hidden. For ignorance, cover it with what garb we may, either of pretence or tact, is certainly not very conducive to self-respect. Surely, in this great state of New York, with her excellent, because well-conducted academies, with the normal school, that nursery of teachers, with the higher departments even of the union and grammar schools, a proper education in all the common branches can not well be missed. If missed I do not hesitate to say that it is no time to begin that preparation after one has taken a school. I touch on this point the less fearlessly because years ago in a neighboring state, it was the fashion to begin school teaching in this very naked way. But put this plainly to each of you. How could a social position be given to men who were in education not a whit better than the pupils they sought to teach, and who had only one element of power, the fear of disgrace, if they could not maintain their discipline? It will be said that public opinion has come round

by making higher demands. As if public opinion could make true men or women, or rather as if public opinion was not a thing of growth through external influences. For it is a law of supply and demand that the wants of every community are made by presenting what is likely to increase its pleasure or its power.

The miners of Cornwall did not incite Watts to invent his steam engine, but that Archimedes of steam power created the force, and made it a necessity, not only for the miners, but for you and for every one. The Croton, in my own city, was an anticipation in minds of genius and public spirit of a public need not at all realized by community itself; and yet, when fairly presented, by what an overwhelming vote it was decreed. I might multiply instances, but these will suffice. So also, one well kept school by a good and efficient teacher not only makes (thereafter) good schools in that district a necessity, but raises the tone of demand throughout the neighborhood. For community in this thing as in other things, when it is made to understand its wants, in general takes tolerably active measures to satisfy them. Thus then a single true soul, well fitted for his duty, and excellent in performance, lifts the whole fellowhood with him, and forms the public demand for many others of like temper with himself. Here also follows the maxim, "You must pay the best price if you want the best article." So salaries rise with the demand. Thus only ought salaries to rise, not so much because flour and beef are dear, but because we are better men and women for our business, with a more generous and extended culture.

I proceed, only to glance at a few of the means within our own power.

Teachers' institutes I place very high. Assemblies of youth for mutual instruction, to be guided and directed by persons of matured experience; of young men and women fresh from the doubts and difficulties and successes in the school room, can not but impart a vigor and life corresponding. The compression of a week, or at farthest, two, is one most conducive to variety and spirit. Add to this, the diversity of questions on the part of the pupils, the hints each throws out in government, the ignorance each quietly discovers in himself when he measures himself by his neighbor; the variety in methods shown by the instructors or lectures, the numberless suggestions, that like precious seed are the parents of a thousand-fold progeny, and are worth a whole library of works on the glory of common schools. From these institutes the mind starts afresh with a steady vigor, such as we picture the traveler on the burning day, as he leaves the cooling fountain. Let us, by such assemblies, speak often to one another, for depend upon it, the apostolic vigor of a lively calling lies greatly in this. A grand point of union lies in the teachers' institutes. Nothing ought to prevent a punctual and constant attendance. Let them have your generous and earnest support.

Next in importance, but by a considerable interval, county and town associations are to be placed. In these the good to be obtained is principally in the habit of that part of culture we call readiness and freedom of speech. Self-command, or in other words, presence of mind, comes with it. It stops, too, a man's tendency to dogmatism. Prove this thing, is the constant silent demand, or cease asserting a dogma—a most excellent training for school masters, whose chief

failing, saith emphatic public opinion, is a leaning that way. If connected with these associations—and I think every teacher ought to be—make up your mind that you will not always be a silent member. Silence is a great gift, but even silence may be carried to excess. A cheerful, encouraging tongue is no small matter. Above all, let us not range ourselves among those who do not take any part themselves, and yet can not refrain from sneering at those who do.

Evidently standing next to this is our state association. A highly proper and useful institution. But while I speak of it most respectfully, I take liberty to say that it is to be looked at with allowance. An association like this is a very powerful trip hammer. It looms up into a very imposing appearance. A great centralized power; a convention of the estates of the schools as it were, when it speaks, it must, and ought to speak with authority. But its authority, its power to influence, must always be the exponent of the individuality of its members. For there is nothing elevating or imposing in it, save as each of us, by a proper self-hood, shall bring here the offering of his life and work. The noblest pile rises to its great proportions by the seemly stones most laboriously wrought of which it is composed. Do not then wait so much, as if for some secret influence the association may give you, as to strive after some influence you may exert on it, for who knoweth, but that mayhap, in this way you may receive that very good you came to get. In a great association like this, each has his own proper work.

Something on a point about which I have felt deeply for years, I meant to have said; but time presses, and I forbear with a simple allusion. I mean some general plan of examinations for the state. But you will readily perceive that this hardly lies within the range of that division of the theme we have been discussing, the means of elevation within our power. Let it be dismissed, therefore, to some other season with the simple remark, that I know of nothing so likely to give us a position of mark so surely as such a plan.

Books and reading demand, in a generous culture, a place second to none. The lips of the well-read teacher drop manna and fatness on the driest lesson. If the teacher can go beyond the lesson books, and above them, the influence he exerts on the pupils is immense. In the boys' eyes he swells into the mightiest proportions, for learning is a true power in the school room. By so much as living lips are more impressive than the same dead wisdom in books, by so much is the teacher greater in the sight of the child, than the author whom he carries in his satchel. I do not now speak of an acquaintance with the books of the school room. That necessity has already been sufficiently enforced. But I mean that more general acquaintance with books which we associate with all true intellectual culture. Shall it be said that time is wanting, that what is at our disposal is broken and disconnected, that thoughtful study is well nigh impracticable, when compelled to lay an author down after a brief perusal? Have we ever tried to make use of the mere droppings of time; has our favorite book been near us, so that we could readily resume our reading; have we read with interest when we did read, or read in a compulsory way, with an indistinct idea that the mere systematic attempt would make us so? The way we read is everything. If our

interest flags; if we find that after we have read a page, our mind has been wandering, let us drop the book; for the measure of our interest will always be the measure of our real improvement. I do not undervalue systematic reading—far from it—but to those of us who have not reached that most desirable habit, a word of encouragement seems both proper and necessary. For the circle of our reward in this finds but a small arc of itself in the school room; for in ourselves, in our own growth, will be found the completeness of the curve. From the artificial constraint of the school, we must unbend either in converse with others or with books. We can not indeed always choose our companions, but we may always choose a few good books. From communion with such society one can enter on the platform of any social caste, and feel that he also is a man.

I am warned by the amount I have drawn on your patience, that I must hasten to a close. Before doing so, there seem still a few words necessary. They shall be said briefly.

The growth of a true character is slow. Look at the oak, the monarch of the forest. The wind sways it; the rain swathes it; the great sun gladdens it; it stretches out its arms, and gets nourishment from the air; it strikes out its roots and draws support and sustenance from the great mother. Frosts and snow alike minister to it. Morning, and high noon, and night; summer and winter; the change of seasons, impart to it both strength and beauty. So, by analogy, is it with man. We must draw discipline and culture from our failures and from our success; from the bright days and from the dreary; from books and from men; from the whole living face of nature, and from the great lessons of art. Especially we must avoid the sad fate that Wordsworth allots to Peter Bell:

> "A primrose by the water's brim
> A yellow primrose was to him,
> And it was nothing more."

Above all, let us live the lives, not so much of school masters and mistresses, but of true men and women. It were always well for us in the great commerce of the world, to recollect that everything that becomes humanity ought to have an interest for us; that we are linked by innumerable cords to every thing around us, and that it is only by this expansion of the soul, that we call the whole world kin.

Thus shall we have a certain erectness of mind suited to all varieties of fortune; a certain dignity which will not bow in servility to the great; a self respect which in due time will lift us to our proper place; and a self-sustaining power, when once there, that will entitle us to that short but striking motto under the picture of the great Warren Hastings in the council chamber at Calcutta, "Mens æqua in arduis"—a mind steady under difficulties.

Courage! courage! my friends! Our hope is in ourselves. It is not for nothing that the trenches around the beleagured fortress of public opinion have been filled with the fallen bodies of those who have preceded us. Victory will yet be seized over the bridge they have helped to make for us. And though the morn be long a breaking, and the night lag, yet, true it is for all and for us,

> "Ever the Truth comes uppermost
> And ever is Justice done."

THE

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THE ORGAN OF

The New York State Teachers' Association, The Association of Graduates of the New York State Normal School, The New Jersey State Teachers' Association, and The California State Teachers' Association.

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